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ABSTRACT

This study examined areas of racial tension and racial attitudes among first-year students at York University in Ontario (Canada). A survey of 1,129 first-year students in 1993-94 indicated that the vast majority believed that visible minority students had been treated equally by professors, staff, and other students. However, the first year was experienced differently by students of Black, East Indian, Chinese, European, and "other" origin. Comparisons did not always favor those of European background: East Indian students reported the greatest number of out-of-class contacts with faculty and staff. While certain outcomes of the first year experience--self-assessments of intellectual development and grade point average--varied by race, these differences could not be attributed to race per se. Focus group discussions conducted with 24 Black students and 33 students of Italian or Portuguese origin found that 23 percent of the Black and 9 percent of the Italian/Portuguese students felt that inside the university they had been treated worse than others because of their origin. Students may have been led to this conclusion because of non-specific feelings of discrimination, classroom experiences with students and professors, and informal experiences with racial overtones. (Contains 14 references.) (MDM)

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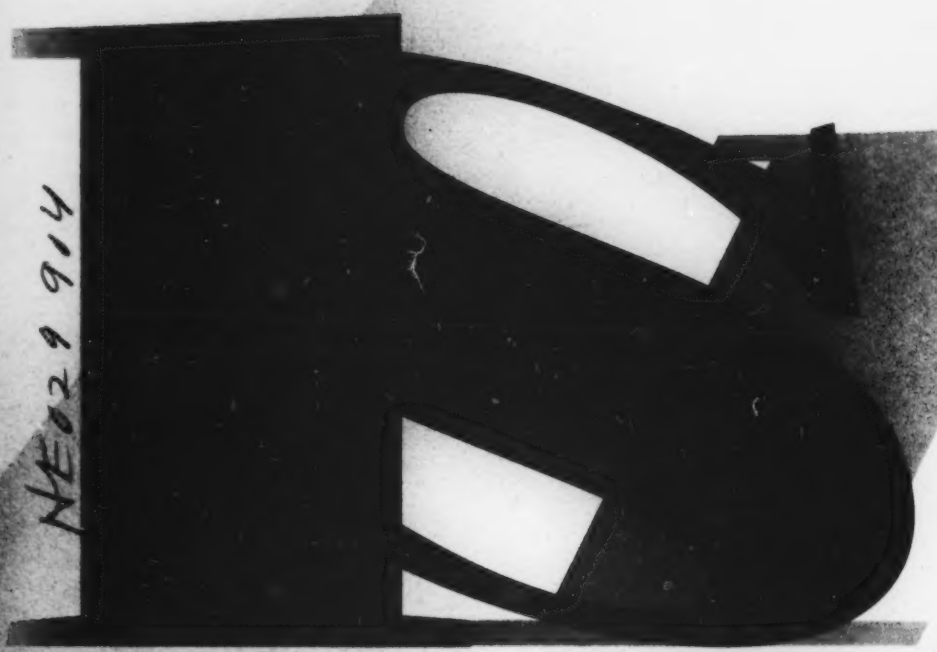
INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH

# A CHARACTERIZATION OF AREAS OF RACIAL TENSION AMONG FIRST YEAR STUDENTS: A FOCUS GROUP FOLLOW-UP TO A LARGE SURVEY

J. PAUL GRAYSON



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# A Characterization of Areas of Racial Tension Among First Year Students: A Focus Group Follow-Up to a Large Survey

J. Paul Grayson

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*The following is a report of general interest.*

## Acknowledgements

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## Summary

A study of 1,129 first year York University students indicated that the vast majority believed that visible minority students had been treated equally by professors, staff, and other students; however, a small number of students stated that visible minority students had not been treated equally.

In order to determine the types of situations students had in mind when they stated that visible minority students had not been treated equally, focus group meetings were held with Black students and students of Chinese and Italian/Portuguese origins. An analysis of focus group materials shows that students may have been led to this conclusion because of: non-specific feelings of discrimination; classroom experiences with students and professors; experiences with staff; experiences with sports; and informal experiences with racial overtones.

## Introduction

In the United States a number of researchers have argued that non-White students experience the university as a hostile and alienating institution.[1] In Canada, while universities are increasingly more sensitive to the possibility of providing a 'hostile climate' for non-Whites (Dalhousie University, 1989), virtually no systematic inquiries have been carried out of the way in which the experiences of university varies by race or of the exact nature of the experiences of non-whites that might be characterized as hostile or alienating. The one exception to this generalization is a study carried out of first year students at York University (Grayson, 1994a).

In this study, that involved 1,129 students, it was determined that the first year was experienced differently by students of Black, East Indian, Chinese, European, and 'other' origins. (In 1993-94 non-European origin groups made up approximately 26% of the first year student body). Comparisons, however, did not always favour those of European background. For example, students of East Indian heritage reported the greatest number of out-of-class contacts with faculty, teaching assistants, and staff. By way of comparison, in terms of contacts with faculty, classroom experiences, and academic involvement, individuals of Chinese origin fared less well than other students. Moreover, while certain outcomes of the first year experience - self-assessments of intellectual development and increases in knowledge, and first year grade point averages - varied by race, these differences could not be attributed to race per se. Instead, explanations were to be found in classroom experiences, contacts with faculty etc., and academic involvement. Finally, when assessing their first year experience, the vast majority of students of all races indicated that visible minority students had been treated equally by other students, faculty and staff. Nonetheless, students of European background perceived more equality of treatment than those of Black, East Indian, Chinese, and, other origins. More concretely, while 91% of European students believed that visible minority students had been treated equally, this opinion was held by 86% of Blacks, 74% and 76% of students of East Indian and 'other' origins, and by only 64% of Chinese origin students.

While the study of first year York students enabled a determination of first year outcomes and the degree to which specific university experiences contributed to those outcomes, it did not permit the identification of the types of experiences that might lead some students to believe that minority students had not been treated equally. The current report deals with this issue.

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[1] See: Patterson et al, 1984; Tracey and Sedlacek, 1984; Loo and Rolison, 1986, Sedlacek, 1987; Tracey and Sedlacek, 1987, White and Sedlacek, 1987, Jackson and Swan, 1991; Nettles, 1991; Hurtado, 1992, Smedley et al, 1993

## Nature of the Study

In order to identify the general nature of negative racial situations experienced by students, focus group meetings were held with Black students, students of Chinese origin, and individuals whose backgrounds were primarily Italian or Portuguese. (For sake of convenience students will be referred to as Blacks, Chinese and Italian/Portuguese). Among Black students, two meetings were held with each of: those who could be identified as Canadian Blacks; Jamaicans; those from other countries in the Caribbean; and Africans. A total of 48 students were involved in the eight groups that were moderated by the same Black female. Three focus group meetings involving 26 students of Chinese origin were carried out by a female facilitator of Chinese background. Four meetings involving 33 students with Italian and Portuguese backgrounds were conducted by a White female facilitator. (See Grayson 1994b and 1994c for more analysis of focus group materials.)

This report will deal with the information collected in the focus groups as it pertains to first year experiences with negative racial overtones at York University. It is important to stress that data on this particularly sensitive topic were collected in as unobtrusive a fashion as possible. Students were not asked leading questions; instead, they were asked whether or not they had been treated differently at York (either better or worse) because of their origins.

After completing four of the sessions with Black students it was decided to ask group participants to complete an end-of-meeting questionnaire dealing with materials covered in the meetings. As a result, some quantitative data relating to half of the meetings with Blacks, and all of the meetings with students of Italian/Portuguese origin, are available for analysis. Unfortunately, no quantitative data were collected after the meetings with Chinese students.

Obviously, the number of individuals on whom information was collected are small (24 Blacks and 33 students of Italian/Portuguese origin); nonetheless, data can assist in the interpretation of focus group materials and vice versa. More importantly, both can provide possible clues as to the types of experiences students had in mind when they stated in the main survey that visible minority students at York had not been treated equally.

The focus of the analysis will be on the identification and characterization of specific areas of institutional experience in which students believe that they or others received differential treatment because of their origins. The primary distinction made is between informal encounters (e.g. casual encounters in halls)

and contacts in structured situations such as classrooms. As much as possible efforts were taken not to impose a pre-conceived theoretical structure on students' observations. Accordingly, in the analysis wherever possible, focus group participants will speak for themselves.

Throughout the research I was concerned that the reported experiences of some students might reflect a general 'victimized world view' rather than actual university experiences. As a result, students were also asked about their experiences outside of the university. The latter can be used as a benchmark in accordance with which experiences inside the university can be evaluated.

## information on Questionnaires

Information collected through questionnaires provided at the end of four focus groups sessions with Black students and individuals of Italian/Portuguese origins indicate that 23% of Black students, but only 9% of those of Italian/Portuguese origin, felt that inside the university they had been treated worse than others because of their origins. None of the Blacks, and only 6% of the Italians/Portuguese, believed they had been treated better. Fifty percent of Blacks and 61% of Italians/Portuguese believed that their backgrounds had no implications for the way in which they had been treated.

When Black and Italian/Portuguese students were asked how they thought students of Chinese origin were dealt with in the university, 27% of the former, and 39% of the latter, said better than others.[2] Twenty-seven percent of Blacks and 49% of Italians/Portuguese stated that origins had no effect. Finally, among students of Italian/Portuguese descent, 3% and 9% respectively thought that Black students were treated better and worse than other students in the university. A further 36% felt that origins had no effect while a plurality, 42%, did not know.

Although the data are limited, they suggest that approximately a quarter of Black students believe that they received worse treatment than others in the university because of their racial backgrounds. Roughly a quarter believed that students of Chinese origin were treated better than others. By way of contrast, very few Italians/Portuguese felt that they or Blacks had received either better or worse treatment because of their backgrounds; however, a substantial number

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[2] It is ironic that in the main study (Grayson, 1994a) fewer students of Chinese origin than others felt that visible minority students had been treated equally by professors, staff, and other students. Also, the first year experience of Chinese origin students was perhaps less positive than for other students.

believed that students of Chinese origin received favourable treatment in the university.

## Areas of Differential Treatment

### The Overall Picture

It was evident from the main survey and from quantitative data collected at the end of focus group sessions that only a minority of students believe that inside the university they had experienced differential treatment because of their origins. The same overall conclusion derives from an analysis of statements made during focus group sessions. As noted by one female Black Canadian student, "I think this university's pretty fair as in discrimination for the teachers and staff like that." The reason she gives is that "there's so many visible minorities here that if something like that [discrimination] was to happen . . . I think there would be like, a big protest and everything." A female Jamaican student told her group that, "I'm not saying that I haven't encountered difficulties. But the thing is," she qualified, "I never thought that I am having this difficulty because I'm Black or even saying from Jamaica."

### Non-Specific Discrimination Feelings

While most students appeared to share sentiments such as the foregoing, a small minority did raise concerns with what can be seen as non-specific feelings of differential treatment. "I have heard rumours," one female Jamaican student intoned, "and I've heard statements about us that we don't go to classes, we don't do homework, we're the worst set of students . . . Hell with them!" She concludes, "what they know about us?" A female Chinese student made a comment of a similar general nature. "I just got this feeling," she observed, "that I'm discriminated . . . I just got a feeling."

### Classroom Experiences With Students

In contrast to non-specific feelings of differential treatment, a few Black and Chinese students identified negative classroom experiences during their first year at York. In some instances other students were the source of the problem; in others professors were felt to be at fault. As an example of the former, a female

Chinese student expressed the opinion that her non-Chinese classmates, "wouldn't be as friendly to you as the other people in their group." On another occasion an African male described a situation in which, after he presented a successful seminar, a White student called him on the telephone "and wondered how I had known all of this. I kept telling myself," the student went on, "if I was a White kid, would he have wondered?"

### Classroom Experiences with Professors

The few students who reported encounters that involved either negative or positive treatment from professors focused on the maintenance of a classroom climate in which students felt excluded from participation; on a chilly attitude on the part of faculty; and on positive marking because of a student's background. With respect to the first mentioned, a male Jamaican student pointed out that, "There are some students, they are so vocal. They don't know more than you, but because you are not as vocal, they [professors] think you are not as bright and your mark will suffer right there." The student links this observation to race by complaining that "most times you will hardly ever find a Black T.A. or a Black professor." Although he does not come right out and say it, the student leaves the distinct impression that Black T.A.s and professors would be more inclusive in their classroom management.

Concern with the level and management of class discussion was also raised by a male Chinese student. "Chinese students," he pointed out, "they don't ask questions in the class. Maybe after class, maybe afraid [sic] of something," he explains. The reason, he elaborates, is that their "English is not good enough."

That for a minority of students faculty may project a chilly attitude is evident in the words of a female student of Italian or Portuguese descent. She complained that, "I felt that the professor was a racist. She was inaccessible." The student continued "she didn't have time. I asked, 'what is going on?' I saw the people who got the feedback," she continued, "and they were all minority Asian."

In contrast to negative experiences related to students' origins, one female student of Italian or Portuguese background related how her origin worked to her advantage. "I had to write a paper for Social Science class," she told her group. "It was on comparing an ethnic paper to the *Toronto Star*." The student admitted that "although I didn't think the paper was very good, it was graded an A. I think it was appreciated that I was from an ethnic background."

## Experience with Staff

An example of a negative experience with university staff is provided by a female Chinese student. "When I came to university," she explained, "I didn't know much about the library, how to use the library, and then I asked a White girl and she just respond very indifferently." The student was convinced that "if another race or White people ask her questions, I think she will behave better."

A negative experience of a different nature was related by a male student of European origin. "With the Student Programmes I was asking a question and I wasn't given the answers. A Black student came in, asked a question, and, all of a sudden they diverted all the attention. . . . They stopped talking to me and started answering that person's questions. That" he emphasized, "made me angry." The student explained that, "I asked why, and they would not tell me."

## Experience With Sports

Students who reported bad experiences associated with sports identified problems with team-mates and with coaching. With regard to the former, a female Canadian Black reported that most of the students on her team were of European origin. She felt that, "they expected you to sort of fit in with them and it is like you don't want to do that, or you don't want to listen to that kind of music, you're discriminated against." The student did not describe the form the discrimination took.

On another occasion a male Jamaican complained that his team "is literally segregated." By way of example he noted that "whenever we trained together then the White people are there and the Black people are here." He nevertheless concedes that "Black people don't really warm to White people."

The same student also identifies what he regards as bias on the part of his coach. "Let's say a White guy and a Black guy gets injured," he hypothesizes. "The White guy she'll go and she'll take charge, she'll attend to him." By way of contrast, "when a Black guy gets injured, she just says, 'well the therapist is over there, you go there'."

## Informal Experience

So far attention has focused on interactions that occur in relatively structured circumstances; however, students also talked of examples of unequal treatment that occurred in informal encounters. For example, a male African student described a situation in which "with a friend, it was so hot inside that we decided to go out and some guy, White, just passed us by, walked a distance, and picked up a chunk of ice and just threw it at us." That this incident was treated as a hostile one is confirmed by the student's statement that "we wanted to follow him out and let's give him a lesson."

Another incident that occurred in an informal setting was described by a female Caribbean student. She was walking with a friend in the Student Centre when they came across "two White guys who handed out flyers to every White person there was and they just passed us straight." They handled the situation by rationalizing "Okay, maybe this is a White thing, because they passed right between us and they didn't give us any flyers."

## General Negative Experiences

From discussion that occurred in all focus groups it was clear that, when it came to unequal treatment based on race, many students saw it as a phenomena that involved students of all origins. This feeling was articulated very succinctly by a female Caribbean student. "You have to remember," she pointed out, "it's not only White people who discriminate against visible minorities, but other visible minorities discriminate against each other, like Chinese."

Consistent with the foregoing, an African male referred to some antagonism among Caribbeans and Africans. He felt that Africans are viewed as "sort of pushing themselves around and they think they're always superior than the Caribbeans."

Although it does not necessarily imply discrimination, it is evident from the statements of some students that a considerable degree of racial self-segregation occurs among first year students. As proof, a male Caribbean student observed that "just walking into the Student Centre you can see the separation. Blacks go upstairs, the Indians have their little corner, the White kids have their area." Self-segregation is also suggested by the fact that in the study of first year York students described earlier visible minority students tended to have friends who also were visible minorities while students of European origin had relatively few visible minority friends (Grayson, 1994a).

## Experiences Outside the University

As stated earlier, it is important to address the issue of whether negative perceptions of university experiences can be attributed to a 'victimized world view' that might be held by students. One way of dealing with this potential problem is by assessing how equality of treatment inside the university compared to equality in other social institutions and/or encounters. In this endeavour it is not necessary to provide a detailed examination of experiences outside of the university (although the information is available from focus groups): an overview will suffice.

The examination can begin with reference to questionnaires completed at the end of focus group meetings. From these it is evident that while only 27% of Black students claimed they have been treated worse than others within York, a far higher 48% felt that they had been treated worse than others outside of York. While only 5% of Black students believed that at York Chinese students were treated worse than others, 26% stated that the latter were treated worse than others outside of York.

When Italian/Portuguese students commented on the same issues, only a small minority - 12% and 9% respectively - stated that because of their backgrounds they were treated worse than others outside and inside the university. By way of comparison, 42% of Italian/Portuguese students felt that the Chinese were treated worse than others outside the university. Only 6% believed that to be true of treatment accorded Chinese within York. In addition, while only 9% thought Blacks were treated worse than others inside York, 55% stated that outside of York Blacks were treated worse than others.

While there is some variation from one group to the next, the common thread that runs through the answers to questionnaires is that students feel that non-White students are treated worse outside the university than within. As a result, while there may be a partial effect, it cannot be assumed that claims of unequal treatment at York are the result of a general victimized world view. Conversely, we are safe in assuming that perceptions of equality at York are not simply carry-overs from outside experiences.

A similar conclusion can be reached on the basis of discussions in the focus groups. Overall, students spent almost three times as long discussing unequal treatment they had experienced outside the university than they spent talking about negative incidents at York. Although it will be the topic of another report, it might be noted that among non-European students there were as many negative

encounters reported with other non-Europeans as there were negative incidents with individuals of European background.

## Conclusion

The preceding analysis focused on identifying the types of experiences that might have prompted some first year York University students to comment on a large survey described elsewhere (Grayson, 1994a) that visible minority students were not treated equally by faculty, staff, and other students. Information for the study was obtained from eight focus groups meetings with Black students, three with students of Chinese origin, and four with mainly Italian/Portuguese background students.

An examination of the large survey, focus group materials, and questionnaires completed after some of the group meetings, leads to four major conclusions.

1. While non-European background students perceive less equality of treatment at York than students of European origin, the vast majority of all students believe that in the first year visible minority students were treated the same as other students by faculty, staff, and other students.

2. Discussions that took place in focus groups, and answers to a questionnaire completed after the discussions, indicate that relatively few students believe that minority students are treated worse than other students at York.

3. Examples of unequal treatment that were reported took the forms of:

    * non-specific feelings of discrimination;
    * negative attitudes/behaviour on the part of classmates and faculty;
    * negative attitudes/behaviour on the part of staff;
    * negative attitudes/behaviour on the part of team-mates and coaches;
    * negative incidents that took place outside of formal institutional settings.

4. Overall, students felt that individuals of non-European origin were treated worse outside of the university than within. This conclusion is

borne out both by answers to questionnaires and time spent discussing examples of negative treatment inside and outside of the university.

It must be stressed that the intent of this study was not to analyze the nature of race relations at York University. Its purpose was simply to identify the types of experiences some students may have had in mind when in a large survey they stated that visible minority students were not equally treated at York. In this regard it is worth noting that most of the incidents described, and the infrequency with which they were mentioned, suggest that negative racial encounters may be less a manifestation of systemic problems than of personal insensitivity. Problems of this nature require a different form of intervention than when dealing with systemic difficulties.

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